U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

OVRA Phase III Reconstruction

EA# DOI-BLM-NM-F020-2009-0052

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Chapter 1: Purpose and Need

1.1 Introduction

The Orilla Verde Recreation Area (OVRA) Phase III Reconstruction Project includes the design and reconstruction of the following sites within the area: Petaca Campground, Taos Junction Campground, Taos Junction Bridge Boat Ramp, and the Rio Pueblo Camping Area. Campgrounds proposed for reconstruction are located in T24N R11E, Sections 1, 10, 11, 12, 21, and 22. Construction would be expected to begin in October 2009 and continue for up to five years, between the dates of Sept 16 and April 14 for each year.

Earlier phases of campground improvements within Orilla Verde were outlined in the *Rio Grande Corridor Plan* (2000), which stated that "All campgrounds will be rebuilt to improve accessibility, provide additional sites where space allows, and provide additional services (2-11). *Orilla Verde Campground Reconstruction* (EA#NM-020-99-018), signed in 2000 following the *Rio Grande Corridor Plan*, identified general improvements to all campgrounds in the recreation area and covered the reconstruction of Pilar and Rio Bravo campgrounds. *Lone Juniper and Arroyo Hondo Campground Improvements* (EA# NM-020-03-013) covered improvements and reconstruction of those campgrounds. The *Taos Valley Overlook Project Plan* (2006) provides guidance for improvements to the Rio Pueblo confluence and Taos Junction Bridge Sites.

OVRA Phase III Reconstruction will address the design and reconstruction of the remaining campgrounds, camping area, and boat ramp; incorporating decisions found in the above documents by reference. This document would not amend a current plan.

1.2 Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of the Orilla Verde Phase III Reconstruction is to redesign and reconstruct the areas facilities and supporting infrastructure to meet changing use patterns, administrative and public needs, and environmental concerns. Current facilities in need of upgrade were constructed in 1972 as part of the New Mexico State Park System. In 1989, the park was turned over to the BLM. The need for redesign of facilities has been driven by both internal and external interests; area managers and the public alike. (See 1.4, Identification of Issues.)

1.3 Land Use Plan Conformance

The proposed action is consistent with the *Taos Resource Management Plan (1988, as amended)* and the *Rio Grande Corridor Plan* (2000), which states that "All campgrounds will be rebuilt to improve accessibility, provide additional sites where space allows, and provide additional services (2-11). The proposed actions would be consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (scenic classification). The *Taos Valley Overlook Project Plan* (2006) also provides guidance for improvements to the Rio Pueblo confluence and Taos Junction Bridge Sites.

1.4 Identification of Issues

Issues identified during preliminary scoping include the following:

1. Universal accessibility
   Campgrounds and boat ramps that have not been recently upgraded are lacking in federal standards for universal access.
2. Low-maintenance and safe facilities
   Facilities that were originally constructed under the New Mexico State Park System are in a deteriorated state, requiring constant attention to basic aesthetics and repair of out-dated plumbing, electrical, and structural components.
3. Soil erosion and runoff from developed sites into the Rio Grande
   Current water drainage from rainfall and snowmelt onto, through, and off of existing campgrounds and other facilities that have not been renovated is contributing to impaired water quality in the Rio Grande.

Chapter 2: Description of Alternatives

2.1 Alternative A: Proposed Action

Under the proposed action, design and construction on all sites would address the three primary issues identified above. Because the proposed action includes award of contract for both design and construction, the details of engineering and design will be non-specific, but will be required by this document to address the issues while also mitigating potential impacts to wildlife, cultural resources, and soil/air/water resources identified in this document. The following design objectives will be incorporated into the design and construction of all sites:

1. Make the recreation resource and facilities universally accessible to the extent feasible.
2. Maintain or improve the visual quality of the area when replacing or adding roads, trails, facilities, utilities, site furnishings and structures.
3. The architectural style should consider local, culturally-sensitive design, blending with the existing landscape and past construction. Colors should harmonize with the surrounding landscape.
4. Provide designs that incorporate low-maintenance and vandal-resistant materials, natural materials and alternative water-harvesting techniques for landscaping.
5. Provide for ease of facility operation, recognizing that BLM employees are not trained to operate or maintain complex mechanical and electrical systems.
6. Utility systems should be designed to withstand the extremes of climate found year-round in the recreation area.
7. Provide for safe car, bus, and recreational vehicle access from and to NM State Route 570.
8. Minimize pedestrian and vehicle interface.
9. Minimize user group conflicts.
10. All new disturbance and construction shall lie within the footprint of existing development.
11. There shall be no net increase in visitor capacity throughout the recreation area.
12. Develop all sites so that runoff is controlled and not discharged into the river.
13. Minimize impacts to wildlife, special status species and riparian habitat.

Under the proposed action, site design will follow guidance found in the *Orilla Verde Recreation Area Reconstruction Design Character Guidelines* (2008) (Appendix A)

Two sites in this proposed action would see removal of facilities and rehabilitation of the area; Petaca Campground and the Rio Pueblo Camping Area. Facilities on the west side of SR 570 at the Petaca Campground (a camping shelter and a pit toilet) would be removed and the site de-compacted, re-graded, and planted with native riparian vegetation and upland shrubs. The Rio Pueblo Camping Area would see closure of the hilltop road to protect cultural resources. Under this proposed action, the two-track road would be closed and converted to an interpretive hiking trail for the site.

A Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan will be developed for all sites to address site control of runoff during construction.

2.2 Alternative B: No Action

Under the no-action alternative, design improvements would not be made to the existing facilities at Petaca or Taos Junction campgrounds, Rio Pueblo Camping Area, or the Taos Junction Bridge boat ramp. Issues of accessibility, maintenance of facilities, and environmental/cultural resource protection would not be addressed.

Chapter 3: Affected Environment

3.1 Recreation

Currently, all sites proposed for redesign and reconstruction are regularly used sites within the Orilla Verde Recreation Area. Camping, picnicking, hiking, boating, biking, and wildlife viewing are common uses of the area.

3.2 Soil, Air, and Water

Soils in the project area are classified as RcG (Rock Outcrop, Very Steep). This group consists mainly of basalt escarpments that have some layers of terrace sediment. It is on these sediment deposits where the majority of the facilities in the recreation area are located. While erosion hazard for these soils is slight, compaction of soils by vehicle and foot traffic and removal of vegetation have increased runoff rates, creating the opportunity for high erosion rates in all sites.

The receiving waters for sites analyzed are the Rio Grande and the Rio Pueblo de Taos. Both streams are perennial through the area and all sites identified are within 300 feet or less of flowing water. Water quality in the Rio Grande is currently meeting all designated use criteria. The Rio Pueblo de Taos was identified as not meeting designated use criteria for High Quality Aquatic Life due to specific conductance and temperature (NMED, 2007). Both rivers are known to become very turbid in response to storm runoff.

3.3 Cultural Resources

Petroglyphs and other cultural sites are common throughout Orilla Verde Recreation Area. Most affected by this proposed action could be the historic site located on the hilltop within the Rio Pueblo Camping Area.

3.4 Vegetation

Riparian-wetland areas (hereinafter "riparian area") are the "green zones" that transition between areas of open water and upland vegetation. It is the unique and critical ecological link between the aquatic and upland environments. Riparian vegetation should capture sediment and provide forage, habitat, and biodiversity (USDI, BLM 1998). Approximately 83 acres of riparian habitat exists in the Orilla Verde Recreation Area. The dominant vegetation in the riparian area includes willows, saltcedar, Siberian elm, New Mexico olive, cottonwood, Apache plume, greasewood, grasses, rushes, sedges and forbs. Saltcedar is the dominant weed species in the riparian area, while coyote willow is the dominant native vegetation.

3.5 Fish and Wildlife

Habitat types in the area are dispersed vertically and horizontally over the landscape in a patchwork pattern that provides a large amount of "edge" where one habitat type blends into another. The riparian habitat along the Rio Grande provides cover to water availability for wildlife and, for larger species, accessed primarily on the west side. Numerous unique, special-feature habitats exist within the area. Several species are obligate to these specific features, such as open water, caves or cracks in cliffs, bank sites, and dense riparian vegetation; that is, they cannot survive except where the feature exists. These species include bats, fish, eagles, falcons, and cliff swallows.

The area provides habitat for elk, mule deer, black bear, bobcat, coyote, grey fox, cottontail rabbit, chipmunks, rock squirrel, mice, wood rat, porcupine, long-tailed weasel, river otter, striped skunk, beaver, muskrat and raccoon. The watershed provides suitable habitat for many reptiles and amphibians, including bullfrog, bull snake, garter snake and collard lizard (Hanlon-Abeita, 2005). A BLM survey conducted in 2005 for fish species in this section of the Rio Grande found white sucker, brown trout, smallmouth bass, common carp, northern pike, yellow perch, rainbow trout and longnose dace.

Migratory Birds

Numerous avian species use the Rio Grande corridor during spring and fall migration, including non-game migratory birds. The project site serves as an important migratory corridor and stopover site for many migratory birds. Common bird species seen in OVRA are golden eagle, peregrine falcon, red-tailed hawk, osprey, great blue heron, mallard, spotted sandpiper, mourning dove, white-throated swift, western wood-pewee, pinyon jay, raven, crow, northern rough-winged swallow, violet-green swallow, bushtit, rock wren, American robin, yellow warbler, blue grosbeak, spotted towhee, red-winged blackbird, Bullock's oriole, and house finch (Hawks Aloft 2005).

3.6 Special Status Species

See Appendix C for a list of all special status species analyzed in this EA. At this time, most of the bat species, Gunnison's prairie dog, bald eagle, American peregrine falcon, and the Southwestern willow flycatcher are known to occur in the vicinity of the project area. Pursuant to USFWS Federal Species List

for Taos County, New Mexico (February 2009), the only listed species which would be found in the project area is the Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) (WIFL), listed as endangered.

In 1993, the BLM began surveying for the WIFL along the Rio Grande in the most likely areas for the species to occur. From 1993 to 1997, nesting birds were located in the project area, however, since that time until 2007 there were only migratory observations. Nesting birds have been documented in both 2008 and 2009, however, on each occasion the nest failed to produce young. Currently, the willow and mixed saltcedar stands provide small patches of suitable and near suitable habitat. Protocol surveys for the WIFL are ongoing and would continue as long as the species continues to be federally listed.

In October 2005, the USFWS designated critical habitat for the WIFL along the Rio Grande, including the project area. The designation for the "Rio Grande – North Segment" begins at the Taos Junction Bridge and continues downstream to the northern extent of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo lands, approximately 30 river miles (USDI, FWS 2005).

Chapter 4: Environmental Effects

4.1 Direct and Indirect Effects

4.1.1 Alternative A: Proposed Action

4.1.1.1 Recreation

Recreation use would remain the same under the proposed action, in both the amount of use and type of activities. Past facility improvements at other campgrounds throughout Orilla Verde Recreation Area have resulted in no significant increase in use over the last five years (Recreation Information and Management System database, 2009), but have enhanced the quality of the experience and improved opportunities for those individuals with disabilities (visitor comments). Improvements at the campgrounds would allow for universal access, keep vehicles on designated routes and allow a more efficient system of traffic flow through the campgrounds and at the boat ramp.

4.1.1.2 Soil, Air, and Water

Under the proposed action, soil erosion in existing sites would be reduced through improved engineering of each site, re-grading and resurfacing high use areas. Runoff will be directed to infiltration areas to prevent direct flow into the Rio Grande and Rio Pueblo de Taos. Reduction in soil erosion adjacent to the Rio Grande would directly improve water quality through reduced turbidity following heavy runoff. Preparation of a SWPPP will reduce the impacts of site disturbance during and after construction.

4.1.1.3 Cultural Resources

All proposed reconstruction under this alternative would occur in the pre-existing footprint of disturbance for each site, therefore there would be no negative effect to cultural resources. One of the objectives of the redesign is to better define vehicle travel and parking areas within each site, thereby reducing impacts to cultural resources from vehicles travelling outside designated areas. Closure of the historic site in the Rio Pueblo Camping Area would further protect resources in that site.

4.1.1.4 Vegetation

Implementation of the proposed action would benefit native riparian vegetation in the watershed by increasing biodiversity and ensuring natural riparian ecosystem processes. Based on the improvements to campground sites, including erosion and traffic control, all riparian habitat within the area has the opportunity to improve and, over the long term, reach its site dependent growth potential.

4.1.1.5 Fish and Wildlife

Design criteria to increase and/or decrease vegetation components usually have a temporary effect on all wildlife species. Project areas are small, and in most cases, wildlife displaced in the short term by implementation of the proposed action would return when vegetation begins to grow back and implementation activities are completed. The anticipated improvements from the proposed action in the native riparian vegetation would result in an improvement in wildlife use of this habitat. The long-term effect would be to create reliable native forage, nesting and browse sources for wildlife where feasible, while providing wildlife viewing opportunities and recreational opportunities for the public.

Migratory Birds
Migratory bird species of conservation concern that have the potential to occur include golden eagle, mourning dove, and pinyon jay. The proposed action will not adversely impact individual birds, eggs, young and/or the nesting habitat of ground nesting birds due to trampling because implementation would occur outside the breeding bird season. There would be no noticeable impacts to avian populations or to species as a whole.

4.1.1.6 Special Status Species

A biological evaluation for all currently listed species has determined a "No affect" or "May affect – Not Likely to Adversely Affect" situation for all federally listed, proposed, or candidate plant and animal species and designated critical habitat in Taos County, New Mexico, for the proposed action. No negative impacts to any threatened, endangered or special status species or designated critical habitat would result from the proposed action. Neither the State of New Mexico nor the USFWS lists any plants as threatened or endangered in Taos County, New Mexico. Therefore, the proposed action would have no affect on federal or state listed threatened or endangered plants.

The proposed action may enhance habitat quality for the Southwestern willow flycatcher. As the project will occur over a long time period, protocol surveys for Southwestern willow flycatcher will occur throughout the life of the project, or as long as the species remains listed. If Southwestern willow flycatcher territories were identified within the project area, a 1/4 mile buffer would be established around them to avoid disturbance to the species or alteration of habitat in areas being used territorially. All project related activity would be excluded from this buffer zone. Project related vegetation management, and the noise associated therewith, would be conducted outside the Southwestern willow flycatcher breeding season, which extends from May 1 through August of each year. This specific project activity would be restricted between April 15 and September 15.

Coordination and consultation between the BLM and the Service would be maintained throughout the life of the project to discuss Southwestern willow flycatcher territory locations, make adjustments to the project schedule/site locations and buffer size, and/or mitigate any potential adverse affects to threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat.
With improvements in the vegetative and hydrologic conditions around the campgrounds, there is the long-term potential to develop habitat suitable for the WIFL and other riparian obligate Neotropical migratory birds. Currently, only small-dispersed patches are suitable for WIFL nesting and the area is primarily migratory stopover habitat. Therefore, a positive impact to the WIFL and critical habitat would result from the adoption of the proposed action.

4.1.2 Alternative B: No Action

4.1.2.1 Recreation

Under the No-Action Alternative, facility improvements to accommodate individuals with disabilities and better manage a variety of uses would not be made. Under this alternative, the BLM would be neglecting its responsibility in providing universal access and improvement of facilities to maintain and enhance the quality of each user's experience. Routine maintenance costs would likely continue to increase under this alternative.

4.1.2.2 Soil, Air, and Water

Under the no-action alternative, soil erosion in existing sites would remain the same or continue to degrade over time. This could lead to an indirect increase in turbidity of the Rio Grande and the Rio Pueblo de Taos following heavy runoff.

4.1.1.3 Cultural Resources

Cultural resources would receive no further protection or interpretation under this alternative. In campgrounds and areas where vehicle routes are not clearly established, damage to sites could occur from unauthorized off-road vehicle travel. Camping and use of the ruins site in the Rio Pueblo Camping Area would continue.

4.1.1.4 Vegetation

The No-Action Alternative would have no affect on vegetation resources.

4.1.1.5 Fish and Wildlife

The no action alternative could have either a beneficial or detrimental effect on individual migratory bird species of concern, depending on the response of habitat conditions and individual species requirements, but affects at the population or species level would not be adverse.

4.1.1.6 Special Status Species

The no-action alternative would have no affect on special status species.

4.2 Cumulative Effects Analysis

A cumulative impact, as defined in 40 CFR 1508.7, is the impact on the environment which results from the incremental impact of the action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions regardless of what agency (Federal or non-Federal) or person undertakes such other action.

4.2.1 Cumulative Actions

4.2.1.1 Past and Present Actions

Some riparian projects that have occurred along the Rio Grande watershed in New Mexico include those controlling saltcedar and nonnative vegetation in the Ohkay Owingeh, Santa Ana and Santo Domingo Pueblos, as well as the Bosque around Albuquerque. In addition, human-caused fires and drought have affected many acres of riparian habitat in the watershed.

4.2.2 Cumulative Effects

4.2.2.1 Recreation

Consistency in facility design with new upgrades and improved access will enhance the recreational experience throughout the Orilla Verde Recreation Area and the rest of the Taos Field Office.

4.2.2.2 Soil, Air, and Water

Current BLM projects are designed to restore native vegetation and ecosystem functionality, based on agency priorities and budgets. BLM management activities would result in increased abundance and diversity of riparian and other native vegetation, benefiting soil, air , and water resources.

4.2.2.3 Cultural Resources

Projects designed to restrict off-road vehicle travel and close known cultural sites to heavy use by the public will help to protect cultural resources throughout the region for scientific, educational, and historic preservation purposes.

4.2.2.4 Vegetation

Current BLM projects are designed to restore native vegetation and ecosystem functionality, based on agency priorities and budgets. BLM management activities would result in increased abundance and diversity of riparian and other native vegetation.

4.2.2.5 Fish and Wildlife

Current BLM projects are designed to restore native vegetation and ecosystem functionality, based on agency priorities and budgets. BLM management activities would result in increased abundance and diversity of riparian and other native vegetation, benefiting fish and wildlife including migratory birds.

4.2.2.6 Special Status Species

Current BLM projects are designed to restore native vegetation and ecosystem functionality, based on agency priorities and budgets. BLM management activities would result in increased abundance and diversity of riparian and other native vegetation, benefiting listed species and critical habitat.

Chapter 5: Consultation and Coordination

5.1 Summary of Consultation and Coordination

On Sept. 21, 2009, the BLM Taos Field Office issued a memo to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *Request for Concurrence Pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and 50 CFR 402.14 for Orilla Verde Phase III Reconstruction* (6841 NMF0200). This memo also documented consultations on earlier phases of this project from 2003 to present.

Public comment and review period for this project opened on Oct 5, 2009 and will close on Oct 16, 2009.

5.2 List of Preparers

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Chapter 6: References

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